

The Ottoman-Kurdish Bedirhani Family Between Imperial and Post-Imperial Contexts: Navigating Change and Narrating Experiences of Transition

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The history of the Ottoman-Kurdish Bedirhani family provides a suitable and also rather intriguing starting point for research into the eventful and fast-paced transition period between Ottoman-imperial and post-imperial contexts. In my dissertation, I trace the history of the Bedirhani family over the late 19th and into the early 20th century – that is, during a time period marked by far-reaching social and political transformations, among them notably the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of nationalisms and nation-states over the first half of the 20th century. These developments profoundly impacted individual biographical trajectories and compelled members of the former Ottoman-imperial elite like the Bedirhanis to weigh their options and to adjust to changing parameters. In my research, I ask how members of the Bedirhani family attempted to make sense of their changing life worlds, how they navigated transition as they experienced it and how they narrated their experiences in retrospect. Based on the case study of the Bedirhani family, an argument can be made for a considerable amount of continuity between imperial and post-imperial contexts as far as ideas about identity and belonging, and also networks and opportunity structures are concerned.

Up until the mid-19th century, the family's eponymous ancestor Emir Bedirhan had ruled more or less autonomously over the Emirate of Bohtan, an area that today is situated in the borderlands between Turkey, Iraq and Syria, with the town of Cizre at its centre. After they had opposed Ottoman centralisation efforts, Emir Bedirhan and his followers were defeated in 1847 by the Ottoman military and exiled from their homeland in Eastern Anatolia. Destitute, they found themselves confined to the city of Kandiye (today Heraklion) on the island of Crete. Different from what one might expect, however, the family did not vanish from the historical record after they had been exiled and deprived of their means. On the contrary, several members of the Bedirhani family re-emerged as rather successful representatives of the Ottoman imperial elite, employed in the higher ranks of the provincial administration and in the military from the second half of the 19th century onward, with Istanbul and Ottoman Syria as centres of their activities.

As the descendants of Emir Bedirhan were a fairly large group, consisting of several hundred individuals, some of them holding prominent positions in the imperial ad-

ministration, they did not go unnoticed by their contemporaries: Several family members have left considerable traces in the Ottoman and Turkish Republican, but also French and British state archives during the time period I was interested in. In addition, a number of Bedirhanis are being mentioned in autobiographies, travel accounts, letters and memoirs of their contemporaries: For instance, Bedri Pasha Bedirhan, district governor (*mutasarrıf*) of the Hawran area in Ottoman Syria in the late-19th century and notorious for his pragmatic and self-interested take on provincial politics, was a regular appearance in European consular reports of the period. His brother Ali Şamil Pasha Bedirhan, head of the Ottoman military administration in Üsküdar around the turn of the century, was a polarising figure – fondly remembered by the Ottoman-Turkish author Halide Edib, but also vilified as a ruthless and violent conservative in the memoirs of other contemporaries. Another example illustrating the variety of sources available are the petitions of the Bedirhani family for a state stipend (*maaş*) and the ensuing internal arguments about the division of this stipend following the death of Emir Bedirhan, which created a fair amount of red tape in the Ottoman Financial Ministry. In addition to these numerous perspectives from the outside, members of the Bedirhani family also wrote about themselves and their trajectories, leaving behind brief autobiographical sketches and longer memoirs. Some have written articles or given interviews which allow to draw conclusions about their biographies and ideas about their identity at different points in time. There is thus a large amount of material available, documenting narratives of the Bedirhani family history and also the experiences of individual family members from a wide variety of perspectives.

Read in conjunction, the material available vividly illustrates how individuals with fairly similar backgrounds as far as education, social status, network connections, language skills and other cultural and material resources at their disposal are concerned ended up in markedly different situations in the aftermath of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Inquiring about strategies of navigating the transition period and investigating narratives of the family history demonstrates that their imperial identity remained a central resource and reference point for family members, for the network structures they operated in and the opportunities they perceived and pursued. Family members combined their references to the Ottoman-imperial past with the ability to address different audiences and to argue effectively for their economic and political, their individual and collective interests in a variety of contexts. Most Bedirhanis who left their mark in the historical record did so because they were skilled code-switchers and broker personalities whose expertise, networks and skills as mediators and mobilisers were sought after by state authorities – whether it was the Ottoman military, the British Foreign Office or the French administration in the Mandate territories of Syria and Lebanon. The historical record also shows that throughout the time period under scrutiny, members of the Bedirhani family themselves were very much interested in recording and transmitting their takes on the family's history. In doing so, they were keen to influence how their past and their role in the wider context of Ottoman and Kurdish history were being represent-

ed. Instead of one monolithic and universally accepted historical account, we are therefore confronted with a multitude of voices sharing stories about the Bedirhani family – sometimes complementing, but often also contradicting each other.

These complexities and ambivalences, and in particular the crucial imperial dimension of the family's history have previously not been at the centre of scholarly attention directed towards the Bedirhani family. So far, the Bedirhanis have primarily been of interest in the context of Kurdish-nationalist historiography. From this perspective, a strong emphasis has been put on the role some family members came to play as pioneers of the Kurdish-nationalist movement in the early 20th century. This particular focus on a few very prominent family members, however, has side-lined stories that do not fit or are simply not of great interest within the broader narrative of Kurdish-national history. Looking at the Bedirhani family in its imperial context, however, allows to bring this plurality of voices back in and helps to draw a more nuanced picture of the family's history, understanding post-imperial identity formation as a complex and multi-layered process which included alternatives to Kurdish-nationalist identity. Studying the trajectories of different family members and their versions of the family's history in conjunction also offers a possibility to learn about decision-making processes in context, to detect narrative strategies along with silences and gaps in individual accounts, and to become aware of opportunity structures and "roads not taken" during the transition period.

My account of the Bedirhani family history is organised as follows: Chapter 1 suggests a theoretical framework, asking about the connections between identity and memory, introducing approaches for the study of self-narratives and drawing on insights from qualitative network analysis. Chapter 2 then discusses the existing research on the Bedirhani family and provides an overview of the collective family history during the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, illustrating the family's social and economic background and providing details on the shared experience of exile and ensuing Ottomanisation. The following chapters then zoom in on trajectories of individual family members, starting in chapter 3 with the imperial careers of Bedri Pasha and Ali Şamil Pasha Bedirhan in the provincial administration in Ottoman Syria and the Ottoman military in Istanbul, respectively. Chapter 4 then shifts the focus to the late-Ottoman period, exploring the Bedirhanis' involvement in a high-profile murder case in Istanbul in 1906 which complicated the relationship between members of the Bedirhani family and the Ottoman authorities. The chapter also tells the stories of Mehmed Salih and Abdürrezzak Bedirhan, who both in their own ways critically assessed and struggled with their place within in the Ottoman-imperial framework, eventually ending up on different sides of the Ottoman-Russian front line during the First World War. Their critical engagement with the imperial ideology and policies, however, is best understood within an Ottoman-imperial framework to which both still subscribed. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 then look into different post-imperial trajectories, including the biographies of the brothers Celadet, Kamuran and Süreyya Bedirhan in late-Ottoman times and in Syria and Lebanon during the French Mandate period in chapters 5 and 6. Lesser known stories like the trajectory of

Müveddet Gönensay, a grand-daughter of Emir Bedirhan who grew up in late-Ottoman Istanbul and continued to live there in the Turkish Republican period, documenting her experiences in a very personal, unpublished memoir, are considered in chapter 7. Other paths led to Europe, as the example of the dancer Leyla Bedirhan illustrates, who drew on her Kurdish heritage and background to create a stage persona and appeal to audiences in Paris and Vienna in the 1930s and 40s.

Interweaving all of these biographical snippets from the history of the Bedirhani family, my goal is not to present a coherent or exhaustive account of the family's history. Rather, I set out to illustrate the plurality, the historical contingencies and complex dynamics of trajectories and narratives. Most biographical accounts of family members suggest some degree of continuity with the family's imperial past in terms of network connections, skills, resources and concerns, even as external conditions and ideological frameworks underwent fundamental changes in the 20th century. These continuities – along with the ability to use them effectively and strategically – contributed to the lasting success some members of the family had in influencing the post-imperial political landscapes and in positioning themselves as pioneers of Kurdish-nationalist thought and cultural revival.